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Landowners waiting on ADOT

Properties in path of proposed freeway

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Landowners in the path of the proposed South Mountain Freeway say they are growing weary of waiting for the Arizona Department of Transportation to decide whether it will buy their properties.

At least two owners plan to start building multimillion-dollar homes on the land in the Foothills 80 custom-home development near Pecos Road and 27th Avenue in Ahwatukee. Building on the lots would drive up costs for the state to acquire the property.

"I'm going to start construction as soon as possible," said Billy Tennison, who owns a half-acre lot in the development. "I'm proceeding on it as fast as I can. I can't have an empty lot sitting there forever."

He plans to build a 23,000-square-foot home valued at about \$1.9 million.

Tennison, who lives north of Dallas, said he has been talking to ADOT right-of-way coordinators since May and had expected a decision by now. He said he would be willing to sell the empty lot for about \$500,000 but can't wait for ADOT.

"It's been very frustrating for me," he added.

ADOT officials say they are moving forward with land acquisitions but must follow a lengthy process before any offers can be made.

Dale Douglas, an Ahwatukee real estate agent, isn't waiting. He also said he plans to start building a home on one of the two half-acre lots he owns in the subdivision. Expected selling price of the home: about \$2 million.

"I'm going to start processing the permits and get my ducks in a row," he said. "I look at the long game, and I can't sit on them (the lots) forever."

The Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway is envisioned as a 22-mile freeway that would link Interstate 10 in the southeast Valley with I-10 in the West Valley. ADOT estimates the freeway's price tag at \$1.7 billion and its completion by late 2015.

The proposed alignment is along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee, cutting through the western edge of the South Mountain Preserve and along 55th Avenue in Laveen.

In December, ADOT notified 27 lot owners in Foothills 80 that their property was in the "take zone" of the proposed freeway. A final decision on the route hasn't yet been made, but freeway officials have reasoned they could save taxpayers money by buying the empty lots along the route before they have homes.

But since then, ADOT has bought lots from only one owner, Brian Patterson. ADOT paid about \$1.9 million for the four lots in May, or an average of about \$488,000 each. Patterson pocketed a profit of nearly \$300,000 on average for each lot, which he bought in August 2004.

The Patterson buyout encouraged other landowners hoping to turn their property

and, hopefully, a profit.

Eight landowners with nine lots have submitted "advance acquisition requests" to ADOT. Although the owners said they frequently check on their requests, they have been told the requests have been sitting on the desk of ADOT director Victor Mendez.

"I don't know what to do; it's frustrating to say the least," said Dennis Cardellini, who submitted his advance acquisition request for his half-acre lot in early April. Cardellini, who lives outside of San Francisco in Livermore, Calif., said he couldn't afford to wait longer than September for a decision.

Cardellini originally purchased the lot to build a retirement home but now plans to sell the lot privately or build a spec home on it if ADOT doesn't buy it.

What he really wants, he said, is a decision.

Other landowners in the path expressed similar frustrations.

"It's not getting anywhere, it's not going anywhere, it's just laying dormant," said Victor Rendina Jr., who lives in Lancaster, Penn., and owns a half-acre lot he's trying to sell privately. "I don't know why someone can't make a decision."

ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said it would be at least two months before the agency decides whether to buy the properties.

"Obviously, we've heard from many of those lot owners who are frustrated with the timetable," he said.

ADOT said it would send letters to the lot owners late last week, asking them what they think their property is worth, Burdick said. Then, the agency will order a property appraisal and consider making offers.

"It's just the dilemma of how we should proceed going forward," Burdick said. "Certainly if we bought the lots and don't need the lots in the future, we'd put them up for sale. We are balancing that perception as to what the future of the freeway may be vs. not taking action and maybe having additional homes that need to be demolished."

ADOT has \$5 million for land-acquisition costs for the South Mountain Freeway this fiscal year, which began July 1. More money will be available in future years to purchase land and possibly homes in the proposed path of the freeway, Burdick said.

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